

Emperor Ashoka the Great

Emperor **Ashoka the Great**, an iconic figure in Indian history, ascended to power as a fierce warrior but transformed into a visionary leader. Reigning over the **Maurya Empire** during the 3rd century BCE, Ashoka's conquests expanded across the Indian subcontinent. His pivotal moment of enlightenment after the brutal Battle of Kalinga led to a profound spiritual and ethical awakening. Ashoka, renowned for embracing Buddhism, dedicated his rule to principles of non-violence, compassion, and societal welfare.

This transformation is evident in his edicts and pillars spread throughout the empire, disseminating moral guidance. For **WBCS Exam** aspirants, delving into the multifaceted legacy of Ashoka unveils not just a historical ruler but a symbol of moral governance, making him a crucial study point for those navigating the rich tapestry of India's past.

This is the sixth blog of the series. We've discussed the **Foundation of Mauryan Empire** in our previous Blog. Check out that blog by clicking the embedded link before moving on to this blog. It will help you to understand the chronology better. So, let's start understanding the **Emperor Ashoka the Great**.

Ashoka (273 - 232 BCE)

Ashoka the Great, also known as Ashoka Maurya, was the third emperor of the Mauryan Empire, which ruled over much of the Indian subcontinent from **273 BCE to 232 BCE**. He is considered one of the greatest emperors in Indian history, and his reign is marked by a remarkable transformation from a ruthless warrior to a devoted follower of Dharma (righteousness).



[Source: DNA India]

Early Life and Military Conquests:

Born around 304 BCE, Ashoka was the grandson of **Chandragupta Maurya**, the founder of the Mauryan Empire. He spent his early years as a prince, known for his bravery and military prowess. Ashoka ascended the throne in 273 BCE and continued the expansion of the empire through conquest. His most significant victory came in the **Kalinga War (262 BCE)**, which resulted in immense bloodshed and suffering. This war deeply affected Ashoka, leading to a profound change in his life and philosophy.

Kalinga War

The Kalinga War, fought in **262 BCE**, was a pivotal moment in Indian history and the life of Ashoka the Great. It marked the final major conquest of the Mauryan Empire and significantly influenced Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism and his subsequent dedication to non-violence.

Causes of the War:

The exact reasons for the Kalinga War are still debated by historians. However, some possible motives include:

- **Expansion:** Ashoka, known for his early military achievements, may have desired to expand the Mauryan Empire further and gain control of Kalinga's resources.
- **Strategic Importance:** Kalinga, with its access to the Bay of Bengal, held strategic importance in terms of trade and defense.
- **Religious and Cultural Differences:** Ashoka, at this time, practiced Hinduism and may have viewed Kalinga's adherence to Jainism as a threat to his religious authority.

The War's Devastation:

The Kalinga War was a brutal conflict, resulting in immense bloodshed and suffering. Estimates suggest that over 100,000 soldiers were killed and 150,000 civilians were captured or died in the aftermath. The war's devastation had a profound impact on Ashoka, leading to a major shift in his worldview.



[Source: National School of Journalism]

Embrace of Dharma and Non-Violence

Emperor Ashoka the Great

The Kalinga War became a turning point in Ashoka's life. Renouncing violence and embracing the principles of Dharma, he converted to **Buddhism** and dedicated his reign to promoting peace, tolerance, and social welfare throughout his empire. His commitment to Dharma manifested in his famous edicts, inscribed on pillars and rock surfaces across the land. These edicts served as a cornerstone of his philosophy, outlining key themes such as:

- **Non-violence and respect for all living beings:** Ashoka emphasized the importance of compassion and ahimsa, advocating for the protection of all creatures, both human and animal.
- **Observance of moral laws and ethical principles:** He encouraged adherence to ethical principles like truthfulness, honesty, justice, and non-stealing.
- **Tolerance of different religions and sects:** Ashoka promoted religious tolerance and respect for diverse faiths, fostering a harmonious society that embraced plurality.
- **Promotion of social welfare and public works:** He invested in infrastructure development, building roads, hospitals, rest houses, and educational institutions to improve the lives of his people.
- **Emphasis on education and learning:** Ashoka recognized the importance of education and established a system for learning and knowledge dissemination, contributing to intellectual growth and cultural flourishing.



[Source: Wikipedia]

Ashoka's Edicts

James Prinsep, a British antiquary and colonial administrator was the first person to decipher **Ashoka's edicts**. These Ashoka's inscriptions are the first tangible evidence of Buddhism. Ashokan edicts are inscribed either on pillars of stone or on rocks. They consist of major and minor groups. They give information on the life and reign of the King.

There are **33 inscriptions** in total and primarily classified into the following:



Emperor Ashoka the Great

1. Major rock edicts
2. Minor rock edicts
3. Separate rock edicts
4. Major pillar edicts
5. Minor pillar edicts

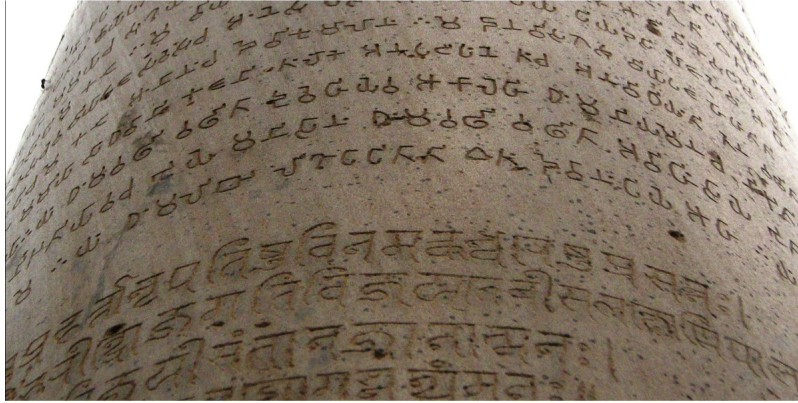
In the earlier half of his reign, the edicts were inscribed on conveniently located rock surfaces and were distributed in the areas of public settlement, where people could easily read them and are referred to as major and minor rock edicts. The inscriptions were composed in the **Prakrit language** (in Magadhi, the dialect of Prakrit in Magadha) and written in **Brahmi script** throughout the greater part of the empire. But in the north-western part, they appear in Kharosthi script and in Kandahar in Afghanistan, they were written in Aramaic, in **Greek script and Greek language**.

Major Rock Edicts:



Emperor Ashoka the Great

Major Rock Edict	Information
I	Prohibition of animal sacrifice, especially during festive seasons
II	Medical treatment of humans and animals, planting of fruits, medicinal herbs and the digging of wells. Mentions the Pandyas, Satpurus and Kerala Putras of South India.
III	Generosity to Brahmins. About Yuktas, Pradeshikas and Rajukas who would go every five years to different parts of his empire to spread Dhamma.
IV	Dhammaghosha (sound of Dhamma/righteousness) over Bherighosha (sound of war). The King Ashoka attached greatest value to his duty.
V	About Dhamma Mahamatras. Talks about treating slaves right. A special cadre of officials, Dhamma Gosha were appointed and entrusted with the duty of spreading Dhamma within the kingdom
VI	King's desire to know about his people's conditions. About welfare measures
VII	Tolerance towards religions among all sects and welfare measures for the public in his as well as his neighbouring kingdoms.
VIII	Ashoka's first visit to Bodh Gaya and the Bodhi tree (his first Dhamma Yatra). Gave importance to Dhamma tours
IX	Condemns popular ceremonies. Stresses on moral conduct.
	Disapproves of the individual's desire for fame and 5



[Source: Wikipedia]

Minor Rock Edicts:

Minor rock edicts are found on **15 rocks** across the country and in Afghanistan also. These are spread over 13 places i.e. Bairat, Brahmagiri, Gavimath, Gujjarra, Jatinga-Rameshwar, Maski, Palkigunda, Maadigiri, Rupanath, Sasaram, Siddhapur, Suvarnagiri and Yerragudi. Bhabru Inscriptions is located at Bairat in Rajasthan and deals with Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism. Two types of stones are used: spotted white sandstone (from Mathura) and buff coloured sandstone and quartzite (from Amaravati). Generally, they are made of sandstone quarried from Chunar. They have almost similar form and dimensions.

Major Pillar Edicts:

These are a set of **7 edicts** found at Allahabad, Meerut, Sopara, Lauriya Areraj, Lauriya Nandangarh and Rampurva. These edicts are engraved on Monolithic pillars. Kausambi edicts are known as Queen's Edicts. They indicate donations given by queen Karuvaki.

Minor Pillar Edicts:

1. **Rummindei Pillar Inscription:** It mentions the exemption of Lumbini (birth place of Buddha) from tax.
2. **Nigalisagar Pillar Inscription:** It is located in Kapilvastu. It informs about Ashoka increasing the size of the stupa of Buddha Konagamana to double of its former size.
3. **Schism Edict:** It is located at Kaushambi, Sanchi and Sarnath. It appeals to maintaining unity in Buddhist order.
4. **Barbara Cave Inscriptions:** It is located in Bihar. They speak about Ashoka's donation of a cave to the Ajivikas.

The Mauryan period is considered a remarkable period in the early history of the Indian subcontinent. The Mauryas ruled over the whole of the subcontinent except Kerala, Tamil Nadu and some parts of northeastern India.

Emperor Ashoka the Great

According to Buddhist tradition, Ashoka ruled for 27 years. The disintegration of the Mauryan empire seemed to have set in immediately after Ashoka's death. The tenth and the last of the Mauryas was Brihadratha, who was murdered by his General Pushyamitra Shunga. This was the end of the Mauryan dynasty.



[Source: Wikipedia]

In conclusion, Emperor Ashoka the Great stands as a luminary in the annals of Indian history, his reign marked by both conquest and profound transformation. From the battlefield of Kalinga to the inscriptions of dhamma on pillars across the empire, Ashoka's legacy resonates as a testament to ethical governance and the pursuit of a higher moral order. For WBCS exam aspirants, understanding Ashoka's multifaceted rule offers not just historical insights but a reflection of the enduring principles that shaped ancient India.

His embrace of Buddhism, commitment to non-violence, and dissemination of moral edicts make him a pivotal figure for those seeking a comprehensive grasp of India's cultural and political evolution. Examining Ashoka's reign unveils a ruler who transcended mere conquests, leaving an indelible imprint on the moral fabric of the Maurya Empire and beyond.



Emperor Ashoka the Great

So, this is all for today. In our next unit, we will discuss the **Post Mauryan Period**. Till then, stay tuned!

